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ABSTRACT

The "diffusion of responsibility" hypothesis as an explanation of helping behavior (or lack of same) is qualified by suggesting that the hypothesis applies only in non-interacting situations. It is hypothesized that interacting groups who are aware of a help-demanding situation actually focus the responsibility and, therefore, take action as a group more rapidly than will a non-interacting group. Evidence is gathered in a contrived help-demanding situation employing a 2x3 (sex X condition) in which three conditions--alone, non-interacting groups, and interacting groups--are used. The evidence substantiates the major hypothesis. Speculation is also presented concerning the relationship of the "alone" condition to the interacting and non-interacting groups. References are presented. (Author)

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THE FOCUSING OF RESPONSIBILITY: AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS IN HELP-DEMANDING SITUATIONS*

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Introduction

The inaction of witnesses to a situation of grave danger for another person has been the subject of much public attention in recent years. In 1964, Catherine Genovese was stalked for more than half an hour and finally stabbed to death in three separate attacks on a New York street. Of the thirty-eight people who watched this scene, no one attempted to help the girl directly or even to contact the police. The publicity from this incident caused a great deal of public concern about the inaction of bystanders. Interest grew among social psychologists, who saw it as an important problem in human behavior, and while their research situations have not been as dramatic and tragic as this incident, some have begun to study the problem of bystander inaction in the field and in the laboratory.

Latané and Darley (1968a, 1968b, and 1970) offer an explanation which could account for the phenomenon of bystander inaction. They suggest that to the extent that a person knows that others are also looking on and are equally available for taking action, he should feel less responsibility for taking action himself. This leads to the prediction that the more people observing a help-demanding situation, the less likely it is that anyone will take action.

In one experiment (Latané and Darley, 1968a) subjects had a discussion through a two-way communication system where they were isolated from each other. During the discussion, one of the other subjects underwent what appeared to be a serious seizure. The results

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showed that the larger the group the subject perceived himself to be a part of, the longer his delay in taking action.

In a second experiment (Latané and Darley, 1968b), smoke was introduced into a room where students were completing a questionnaire. Again, the larger the group the less likely was anyone to respond to the "emergency."

In their first experiment, Latané and Darley (1968a), posit diffusion of responsibility as an interpretation of their findings, but they are not explicit as to what kind of group "others present" means. In their experiment, the subjects were not able to communicate with others whom they believed to be present. This constituted a group only in a limited sense, for it lacked meaningful interaction and a functional group structure. However, the experimenters do not qualify their hypothesis to take these factors into account.

In their second experiment, Latané and Darley (1968b) discuss factors involved in a group situation. They hypothesize that each person in the group may conform to the apparent passivity and lack of reaction of others. This may be due to the ambiguity of the situation. The subjects did not recognize the situation as a help-demanding one. However, again, although the subjects were in a group situation, they did not verbally communicate with each other. Therefore, the members of these groups were involved in more of a "co-acting" group, since each subject had a questionnaire to complete and did not communicate freely with other subjects.

Thus, we would suggest that these experimenters have not been explicit as to what kind of group inhibits individuals from recognizing a situation as an emergency, and how this is accomplished. Do they mean groups similar to their experimental ones where the subjects did not interact?

Also, when Latané and Darley discuss how group members influence each other, they only mention implicit cues involved in communication. They ignore a very important means of communication--verbal behavior. This "noncommunicating" paradigm is also used by others in this area, such as Ross (1971). The question raised by this paper is, "How do group factors influence behavior in a help-demanding situation where the bystanders are a freely interacting group?"

We would suggest, based on the earlier research of Latané and Darley, that in a help-demanding situation no one member of a non-interacting group can be blamed for inaction; the responsibility falls upon the entire group (diffusion of responsibility). Members of such a group do not discuss the matter or decide on what action to take nor do they "divide the labor" and "appoint" someone to take care of the emergency. Most importantly, they may be in a position where others cannot evaluate their behavior at that particular time.

In interacting groups, responsibility diffusion becomes an untenable hypothesis. Assuming that most groups are likely to act along normative lines, and assuming that help giving is a prevalent American norm,[1] an interacting group of bystanders will act in a situation where it is clear that intervention is required. In a field experiment (Piliavian, Rodin, and Piliavin, 1969) involving groups of subjects who were able to interact freely during a help-demanding situation no evidence was found to support Latané and Darley's diffusion of responsibility notions. In fact, the opposite result occurred. The larger the group of subjects the more quickly they responded. One explanation for this may be that the interaction of the group actually focuses (rather than diffuses) the felt responsibility. The group, after deciding that an emergency

exists, may, in an informal or even implicit fashion designate or sanction certain members to take care of the problem. Thus, the group structures itself for action, and indicates a preferred course of action for its explicit or implicit designees to follow. Also, members of an interacting group are in a position to see each other and evaluate each other's actions. Thus, sanctions can be imposed for violation of a cultural norm of helpfulness.

Korte (1971) also obtained findings consonant with our theorizing concerning the Piliavian study. He set up two communication levels using confederates--one a "true" emergency-defining situation (TC) and the other a "minimizing" situation (MC). Contrary to his expectation, response to a contrived emergency occurred less often in the TC situation. This was explained by suggesting that in the MC situation the true subject interpreted the feedback to mean that there was no emergency situation at all; therefore, no action was called for whereas the TC subjects felt that the others (really confederates) had defined the situation as an emergency and were "taking charge." This intriguing post-hoc explanation needs further examination, of course.

Following the reasoning and research just outlined, it is suggested that group factors resulting from interaction (evolution of a leadership structure, communication, focusing of responsibility, etc.) influence feelings of responsibility if a situation is judged to be an emergency, and even aid in making that decision. Thus, it is this paper's contention that diffusion of responsibility occurs only where members of a perceived group are isolated from each other and communication is impeded (as in the Genovese killing). Therefore, it is hypothesized that in help-demanding situations intervention will occur more quickly among

interacting observers than among non-interacting observers.

Regarding solitary observers, we would hypothesize, following Latané and Darley, that in a help-demanding situation solitary observers will intervene more quickly than members of non-interacting groups. This hypothesis is based on the idea that, by definition, solitary observers are the only ones aware of an emergency situation and, thus, the only ones who can help. The norm of help-giving provokes them to action. Also, in solitary observer situations time is not used in checking in subtle ways with other co-acting group members to decide if a situation is really an emergency.

When a comparison is made between solitary observers and interacting groups, the situation is not clear enough to state a hypothesis. However, we would suggest that deciding whether or not a situation is an emergency and structuring a group for action require time--time that is not needed by the solitary observer. However, factors (such as possible danger or potential embarrassment) may impede the solitary observer from quick action.

Procedures

The subjects were taken from a subject pool made up of introductory psychology students who received class credit for participating in the experiment. They were told that the experimenter was studying parental behavior and that they were to be hidden observers during an interview between the experimenter and a married couple. The interview would be tape-recorded, but they would be looking for non-verbal types of behaviors. Subjects were told that the taping was being done unbeknownst to the parents to insure honesty of their responses, and that the parents would be informed of the taping later and their permission secured before the

tapes would be analyzed. It was explained to the subjects that this was a very important task because of the great amount of time and effort (several months of studying the behavior of children in the families being examined) that had gone into preparation for the interview. Subjects were told that if anything went wrong, this would be a severe loss to the experimenter, because such an occurrence would disallow the experimenter's completing his thesis. (Subjects were, of course, debriefed after the experimental sessions.) They were then given scoring sheets in order to code certain behaviors in the interview session. The subjects were seated in an observation room so they could view the up-coming interaction through one-way glass mirrors giving visual access to an observation room. Another observation room bordered on the opposite wall of the interview room. After giving the subjects their instructions, the experimenter went into the interview room and turned on a tape recorder. He then left the room and waited in the corridor, ostensibly for the married couple. The tape recorder was set in such a way that the tape appeared to break exactly five minutes after it was turned on. This was done by marking the tape and then playing exactly five minutes of tape. The tape is cut at that point and rewound to the marked spot. When the recorder was started the tape played five minutes and then the take-up reel started spinning rapidly, slapping the loose end of the tape against the recorder. This created a flipping noise which was picked up by the recorder's microphone and transmitted to a speaker that was in the observation room. The noise was obviously loud enough to make the parents aware of the taping immediately when they entered the room. The experimenter started a stop watch concealed in his pocket at the instant he turned on the recorder. Latency of response was measured from the

time the tape broke to the time the subjects opened the observation room door. This was done by subtracting five minutes from all latency scores.

If the subjects responded, the experimenter fixed the tape and kept the recorder on. Five minutes later the experimenter sent an interviewer into the observation room to administer a short questionnaire and a debriefing form. If subjects did not respond, the experimenter entered the observation room five minutes after the tape broke and told the subjects that the parents were late and that he was going to call them. If subjects did not mention anything about the tape the experimenter appeared to notice the noise, saw the broken recorder, and went into the interview room to fix the tape. After leaving the room he waited five minutes and then sent in the interviewer. The entire session with all subjects was tape-recorded, from the experimenter's instructions to the post-experimental interview. This was done to aid in verifying whether or not verbal interaction did occur in the multi-person groups.

There were three experimental conditions: 1) One subject was in the observation room and was told that he was the only observer; 2) One subject was in the observation room and was told there were two other observers in the observation room on the opposite side of the interview room; and 3) Three subjects were in the same observation room and were told that they were the only observers. The latency measure was taken on the entire group in this condition. As indicated, the research hypotheses were that the observers in conditions one and three would respond more quickly than observers in condition two. No specific hypotheses were stated about the relationship of conditions one and three. Ten subjects or groups of subjects were run in each condition--five of males and five of females.

Results and Discussion

A two by three factorial design was used (sex x condition). The "reality" of the experimental situation is evidenced by the fact that twenty-five of thirty subjects (or groups, as in condition three) did respond within five minutes (see Table 1) and also by post-experimental interviews.[2] Although females as a whole averaged more time to respond (males, $\bar{x}$ = 55.1 sec.; females, $\bar{x}$ = 103.7 sec.) there was no main effect of sex because of the great variability of data and small sample size. However, there was a main effect of condition ($F = 4.86$, $p < .05$).

Although there was not a significant overall sex effect, a bit of speculation may be in order. There appears to be a tendency for males to respond more quickly than females. Possibly, cultural and social norms may help to explain this trend. In American society, the male still has certain expectations made on his behavior as the initiator of action, bread-winner, protector, etc. (women's lib not withstanding). In this experiment, males may have felt that it was part of their male role to intervene in a help-demanding situation and were more aware of sanctions regarding their behavior, especially in groups where they could be evaluated by others. It is interesting to note that particularly in condition II (non interacting apparent groups) females responded much more slowly than males. We did not specify whether the other (fictitious) observers were males or females. Some may have assumed (or hoped) that the other "subject" was male, thus perhaps relieving them of responsibility. This hypothesis suggests further research regarding the composition of bystander groups. This experiment used homogeneous groups, but more work could be done with two man, one woman and two woman, one man groups. In a mixed group would the man be the responder? Another interesting

situation might be a single male subject in the observation room and "female observers" in the other observation room.

Individual *t*-tests between conditions two and three and between conditions one and three indicated that both research hypotheses were confirmed. Persons alone or in interacting groups usually reacted much faster than did those in non-interacting apparent groups. This finding is contrary to what would have been expected by a simple application of the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis which would have predicted no difference between conditions two and three. The results are also somewhat at odds with the results of Korte (1971) which found "focused" subjects responding more quickly than either TC or MC subjects. It should be noted, however, that he had no true alone condition in his research. The "focusing" of responsibility was through making the other subjects (confederates) less able to intervene.

Earlier in this paper the criticism was made concerning Latané and Darley's co-acting and non-interacting groups. We found that much interaction went on during the five minute period before the tape broke. First of all, the subjects were in a good position to interact. They were not in a rigidly structured situation, limited by a rotating microphone system while sitting in separate cubicles, nor did they have their heads buried in a test booklet. They were in a small room, seated around a desk with their chairs about three feet from each other in front of a one-way glass where they could see into the "interview" room. They were free to look at each other and talk to each other. The subjects, once the experimenter left the room, would begin to converse with each other in polite banter - "What classes do you have?", "Have you been in another psychology experiments?", "Gee, mid-terms are coming up!" Some

groups of subjects began discussing the way the rating forms were to be completed. (This was a good indication of the success of deceiving the subjects that they were really observers) and instructions to them. Examination of the tape recordings helped verify that interaction took place although no systematic analysis of the recordings was attempted.

The results also show that, except for one female group, condition three groups responded, on the average more quickly than did those in condition one ("alone"), a finding contrary to those of Korte (1971). No hypothesis was presented about the relationship of these conditions, but perhaps some discussion regarding this point may be helpful. In the interacting group there are more people to furnish information useful in determining that this is a help-demanding situation. A factor that might work against a more rapid response by groups in the simple fact that they must take time to communicate and reach conclusions. Individuals alone, of course, are not faced with this time-consuming task. They can take action more quickly, but this requires that they decide whether or not a given situation is an emergency <u>without</u> the help of other opinions. Also, they must assume all possible danger or embarrassments. Further research should be done to clarify the reactions of lone individuals and interacting groups to help-demanding situations. However, the results would seem to indicate that under some conditions interacting groups <u>focus</u> rather than diffuse responsibility in help-demanding situations.

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Footnotes

[1]There is strong evidence that cultural norms influence the behavior of interacting groups, and usually one of these norms is that of helping others in distress. In support of this, Williams (1967) states that humanitarian values meet the criteria to be considered major values in American society. Berkowitz (1967) states that the experimental results and the subjects' post-experimental interviews of his research indicate there is a widespread social standard in American middle-class society prescribing that a person should aid those who are dependent upon him.

[2]In this experiment every subject was given a legitimate reason <u>not</u> to intervene. The experimenter told each subject that the parents would not know that they were being observed and that if they did know it might ruin the experiment. Thus each subject had the opportunity of not responding with the excuse that he did not want to be seen by the parents and thus jeopardize the experiment - yet most responded.

Table One

Raw data of two by three design--
sex by condition (in seconds; 300 second maximum)

	Condition			
Sex	I	II	III	Total
Male	17 48 17 83 16	131 9 90 19 300	17 42 18 11 9	
	$\bar{X}_{11}$ = 36.2	$\bar{X}_{12}$ = 109.8	$\bar{X}_{13}$ = 19.4	$\bar{X}_{11}$ = 55.1
Female	7 47 45 18 69	300 300 60 300 28	15 23 21 23 300	
Total	$\bar{X}_{21}$ = 37.2	$\bar{X}_{22}$ = 197.6	$\bar{X}_{32}$ = 76.4	$\bar{X}_{21}$ = 103.7
	$\bar{X}_{11}$ = 36.7	$\bar{X}_{12}$ = 153.7	$\bar{X}_{13}$ = 47.9	$\bar{X}_{6}$ = 79.4